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ABSTRACT

This workshop focuses on the utility of decision making counseling: what it is, how it is operationalized into counseling behaviors, and what applications it has to counseling. Four sequential stages are proposed for explaining the use of the technique, including: (1) conceptualization; (2) enlargement of the response repertoire; (3) identification of discriminative stimuli; and (4) response selection. Several applications to educational and career counseling are suggested, e.g., decisions about course selections, interpersonal relationships, and employment qualifications. The role playing method for teaching decision making counseling skills in a workshop setting is also explained. (JAC)

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A WORKSHOP IN DECISION-MAKING COUNSELING

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Presented at the Annual Meeting of the
American Personnel and Guidance Association

Detroit, Michigan
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A WORKSHOP IN DECISION-MAKING COUNSELING

This workshop will focus on the utility of decision-making counseling. Our goals are to help you understand what rational decision-making counseling is, how it is operationalized into counseling behaviors, and what applications it has to counseling.

What is Rational Decision-Making Counseling?

People are constantly making decisions--most of them without professional assistance. Occasionally, people seek decision-making help from professionals, e.g., counselors because their own resources seem inadequate. Some of these people are indecisive in many facets of their lives and need help that is more extensive and therapeutic than rational decision-making counseling. On the other hand, many people suffer periodically from indecision and are capable of benefiting from rational decision-making counseling. Thus, counselors need to be aware of the difference between indecisive persons and persons experiencing temporary indecision in order to screen counselees accordingly.

How can professional counselors help persons with decision-making difficulties in a manner that is different than the assistance they may receive from relatives, friends, and casual acquaintances? Certainly, all of these people can give advice, so advice giving is hardly a different response. Lay people are also more liable to profess having no solutions to suggest. On the other hand, professional counselors should be able to help counselees to help themselves even when clear-cut solutions are not obvious or when they are blatantly obvious. We believe that rational decision-making counseling is the kind of response to persons experiencing decision-making difficulties that separates counselors from lay persons.

Our view of rational decision-making counseling is as follows: Counselors assist counselees through a linear, step-wise set of interactive

responses. In so doing, every effort is made to help counselees to be responsible for their own decisions.

Several writers have suggested outlines of step-wise decision-making plans in an effort to clarify the idea--not to promote rigid sequencing of counseling behavior. Horan (1979) suggests that most of the plans are directly comparable and can be synthesized into four sequential stages: conceptualization, enlargement of the response repertoire, identification of stimuli discriminative of positive or adversive consequences for each response, and response selection.

Explaining How Rational Decision-Making Counseling Works

In rational decision-making counseling, counselors use the step-wise model of their choice as a road map for guiding counselee decision-making. In so doing, all skills and attitudes related to relationship-building, e.g., providing empathy, concreteness, respect, and genuineness, remain as important as in any other kind of counseling relationship. In this workshop, we will use the four sequential stages proposed by Horan (1979) as a vehicle for briefly explaining how rational decision-making counseling may be used.

Conceptualization. As Horan (1979) points out, "The basic task here is to define the problem or decision clearly" (p. 175). In conjunction with this basic task, Horan identifies three important associated skills. They are: preventing counselee feelings from unnecessarily interfering with successful decision-making, being able to correctly define the choice problem, and being able to explain the decision-making procedure to the counselee.

Skillful counselors need to help counselees to recognize and explore feelings associated with the decision-making problem in order to understand those feelings prior to attempting more advanced steps in the decision-making process. In addition, counselors need to carefully attend to the content and

affect expressed by counselees in order to uncover decision-making dilemmas and rival choices. This is especially important where counselees are apparently unable to recognize these problems themselves.

Finally, the step-wise decision-making process is best used when counselees understand the process and cooperatively participate. Thus, counselors need to be able to explain the rational decision-making approach in a clear, non-threatening manner as a suggested strategy that counselees may accept or reject.

Enlargement of the response repertoire. Once counselor and counselee agree to use the rational decision-making strategy, the next step is to jointly identify all alternative choices available to the decision-maker. Since the decision-maker owns the problem, we recommend seeking all possible alternatives from the counselee prior to suggesting additional alternatives that occur to the counselor.

Identifying alternatives can become complex and confusing. Consequently, we recommend occasional note-taking at this stage in order to record all important information. It is important, however, to keep note-taking to a minimum so as not to interfere with interpersonal communications between counselors and counselees.

A supplementary idea comes to mind for helping counselees who may be learning disabled. A large flip-chart used as a chalkboard may be a helpful way of helping them to organize and visualize the alternatives more clearly.

Identification of discriminative stimuli. When counselor and counselee have identified as many alternatives as may occur to them, the next step in the rational decision-making approach is to systematically weigh the advantages and disadvantages of each alternative. This may require acquisition of additional information not available in the interview setting. As stated above,

we recommend that counselees be encouraged to express their ideas (about the advantages and disadvantages associated with choices) before counselors share their own additional observations. Note, however, that we do encourage counselors to share their own observations--as information dispensers who provide information rather than advice. There are ways to share opinions and ideas so that the recipient knows what you mean but does not think that failure to agree will result in disintegration of the relationship.

Response selection. The rational decision-making approach to counseling is predicated on the principle that counselees will eventually make a choice or decision, albeit a tentative one. Of course, the decision not to make a decision is actually a decision--in this case to leave matters as they are. At this stage of the relationship, counselors need to be able to assist in clarifying and organizing all of the preceding information and discussion as well as in planning for implementation of a selection. Often, counselors using this approach will help to arrange for some kind of follow-up and evaluation plans realizing, with the counselee, that sometimes we have to go back to the drawing board and think about an alternative decision because the original plan faltered or failed.

Applications to Counseling

We think that rational decision-making counseling is applicable to a wide range of personal and educational-vocational problems presented by counselees that are decision-making in nature. Our underlying assumptions are that counselees are often capable of making their own decisions with skillful assistance and that they have the right and responsibility to do so whenever possible. An additional feature of the rational decision-making approach, when used appropriately, is that counselees may generalize the decision-making skills to their own independent decision-making efforts.

Several examples of counselee problems which are decision-making in nature are as follows:

1. The counselee is an elementary school child who desires to begin instrumental music studies but does not know what instrument to choose.

2. The counselee is a married adult trying to decide whether or not to seek a separation (divorce).

3. The counselee is failing a college preparatory course, e.g., geometry, yet plans to go to college after high school and is unsure whether or not to drop the course.

4. The counselee is a medically controlled epileptic who is unsure whether or not to inform a prospective employer and risk being refused a job.

5. The counselee is a high school student who is attempting to decide whether or not to go to school or work after graduation.

6. The counselee has received the results of a standardized test and is undecided about how to respond to the newly acquired information.

During the demonstrative part of our workshop, we will model rational decision-making counseling. As you observe the role players, attempt to discern their movement through the stages, critique their accomplishments and foibles (nobody's perfect), and think about the applicability of this approach to your work.

Reference

Horan, J. J. Counseling for effective decision-making. North Sciute, Mass.: Duxbury, 1979.